

Reagan seeks OK on MX with basing decision later

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President Reagan, lowering his sights on the controversial MX missile program, is now willing to settle for congressional approval of the weapon itself while putting off the question of how to base the MX until next year.

He told the nation in his weekly radio broadcast Saturday, "The basing mode is not an issue. There's plenty of time to decide on that. What we need now is a clear, positive vote on the missile itself, to go forward on production of the missile."

Facing the political reality that his dense-pack basing plan is difficult to sell even to his congressional supporters and, for now, wholly unacceptable to his foes, Reagan is prepared to salvage the best he can get. That means that the president hopes the Senate this week will permit him to go ahead with production of a few of the MX missiles and that he can use the basing decision delay as a compromise to secure House approval.

Having lost by a vote of 245 to 176 last week on the House bill to provide \$988 million for the first five MXs, Reagan now hopes for Senate approval of production funds alone this week, setting aside the basing mode until the next session of Congress. The special or lame-duck session of Congress ends Friday. It is far from certain that this presidential retrenchment will save the MX even in the GOP-dominated Senate, or if it does, whether the Democratic-controlled House can or will reverse itself before leaving town for the Christmas holidays.

This was much the same message Reagan conveyed in his impromptu news conference in the Oval Office on Friday and that Reagan's advisers are propounding to members of Congress in these final five days of the special session.

"In the weeks ahead, we'll continue to bring the facts to you, the American people, and your repre-

sentatives on this vital issue," Reagan said in his broadcast. "We've already done it in the hearings before the Senate. I only wish the House had given us the opportunity to do the same before it voted last Tuesday to cut funds for the Peacekeeper missile. It's hard to make a good decision before you've heard the facts. And in my opinion the House of Representatives voted without really considering the facts."

While it is clear that the fate of the MX hangs in the balance, it also is obvious that the administration was unprepared for the crushing impact of the testimony that even the joint chiefs of staff were initially opposed, 3 to 2, to the dense-pack basing mode. The candid testimony of joint chiefs chairman John W. Vessey Jr. was devastating and so was the statement by Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash., that the basing mode was perceived by the public as a Rule Goldberg contraption.

But Jackson has since taken part in White House discussions with key senators of both parties on ways of "fencing off" the basing issue until later. Even Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, D-S.C., praised Reagan's press conference statements as "conciliatory."

But Hollings, the Democrat designated to respond to the radio speech, hardened his rhetoric Saturday, declaring: "Three of the four military service chiefs tell you the \$40 billion MX program is a bad idea and still you plunge ahead." And Hollings said in a statement released before the president went on the air:

"I know you didn't set out to become the biggest spender of all time, Mr. President, but your blind stubbornness, trying to have it all at once, has brought you there."

Hollings, who has presidential ambitions in 1984, was giving the president some of his own medicine on the MX. Reagan was just as contemptuous in his 1980 campaign against President Carter's race-track concept for the MX as many members of Congress are of dense-pack.

Reagan noted in his radio talk that Congress had ordered his administration to submit a basing by Dec. 1.

The administration faces a rough and complex road ahead on the MX. Not only is the costly system considered by many opponents as a major element in the soaring deficit, it also is difficult to comprehend how putting all the MX missiles together near Cheyenne, Wyo., would make it more difficult for the Soviet Union to knock them out in a first strike.

Scientists may understand the principle of "fratricide" — that the

first Soviet missiles will trigger the following ones harmlessly in the air — but laymen do not.

And Congress already has ruled out hardening the existing Minuteman silos scattered around the West. Race track, the plan to keep the MX moving on rails in a huge oval Western states, is dead.

And Reagan's strategic arms negotiators talking with the Russians have good reason to fear that the land-based element of the land, sea and air strategic "triad" may disappear as a deterrent.

Reagan is compromising because he had to, but even this may not save the MX program.